



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

The Port City earns its moniker as downtown takes shape

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Image: 1748 map, Library of Congress.

This 1748 map of what would become the downtown area of Alexandria was prepared by 16-year-old surveyor's assistant George Washington when the town's founders were competing with the tiny settlement of Cameron, a location on the north side of Great Hunting Creek about three miles to the west, for designation as a new port town in Northern Virginia.

Oddly, the compass rose on the upper right side indicates that the northerly direction is on the right side of the view, with the eastern waterfront at the bottom. Clearly, the water entrance as viewed by a sea captain emphasized the importance of trade and shipping to the new town's purpose.

At the time, the only buildings in the area were those associated with the tobacco warehouse and inspection station established by Hugh West in 1732, indicated by the lower blue arrow. It was at the last point possible before tobacco leaves, cultivated from across Northern Virginia, could be inspected, weighed and loaded onto ships for transport to England.

The English crown required these final steps of oversight be taken to ensure the finest quality and accurate weight of the product before the commodity reached the shores of the mother country. The city seal of Alexandria, which includes a set of scales and a three-masted ship on the open sea, feature this important trade connection to the origins of the city.

Among the interesting features of the map is the line drawn below and beyond the two natural land points labelled "The Edge of the Channell of the River." A century later, this shallow bay behind this line, indicated as "The Shoals or Flats," would be filled in to extend Alexandria's river frontage out to the deep water channel of the "Potommack" for shipping and trade purposes.

When this map was drawn, the bay was only about three feet deep, as indicated in the smaller print. The top blue arrow documents the swampy marshes of Ralph's Gut, a seasonal watercourse that meandered to a point near present day Cameron and St. Asaph streets.

Although Cameron Street was originally intended to be the primary east-west thoroughfare of Alexandria, in the 18th century vehicular travel on that street often had to divert one block south to King





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Street to avoid getting stuck in the muddy quagmire that routinely developed at the headwaters of Ralph's Gut.

Parallel to Ralph's Gut on the lower side is the old Rolling Road, named for the large hogsheads of tobacco that were compressed into large circular bales and actually "rolled" to their final destination from miles away. The small boxes along the roadway facing the riverfront indicate buildings along the route, West's warehouses and home, as well as a small tavern to lodge farmers who had traveled long distances to the site.

One unusual notation on the map is the designation of the future land area of Alexandria as "Area 51." No known connection to the similarly-named UFO extraterrestrial zone suspected outside of Rachel, Nev. has yet been established. Apparently, this zone in Virginia was in reference only to other mapped areas in the northern region of the colony.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.